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Creating a network on and off-line, in and out of Africa: African Women Playwright Network[1]

Yvette Hutchison with Steve Ranford,[2] University of Warwick, UK

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Abstract:

This article compares and analyses factors that impact when creating a network on both online and live networking platforms, designed as spaces for artistic and critical engagement both within Africa and beyond. As I draw on the African Womens' Playwright Network as my example, I consider how we can acknowledge the materiality of the processes and relationships involved in these kinds of networks, which as Stephansen argues, also involve the making of new publics. In this analysis I particularly reflect on the impact of using Linda Tuhiwai Smith's approach to decolonising indigenous research methodologies when creating a cross-cultural network.

In this paper I set out to analyse and compare online and live networking, as spaces for artistic and critical engagement both within Africa and beyond, drawing from the research I conducted via the African Womens' Playwright Network from 2015 to 2019. It will explore the contexts, benefits, limits and potentialities of technologies in shaping creative and professional networks, particularly for researchers wanting to move away from static or macro approaches to understanding so-called 'African' identities and transcend the beleaguered discourses of 'gender and development' or 'empowerment'. In this analysis I particularly reflect on the impact of using Linda Tuhiwai Smith's approach to decolonising indigenous research methodologies when creating a cross-cultural network. Finally, I compare the efficacy of the

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different platforms and reflect on my learning specifically and more generally regarding the use of on and off-line spaces for network building.

I want to begin my analysis of factors that impact when creating a network on both online and live platforms by tracing some of the background to this project, in order to elucidate its aims, objectives and the research that has emerged. While co-editing *African Theatre: Contemporary Women* (2015), Jane Plastow, Christine Matzke and I tried to trace new theatrical work by African women writers, directors, and actors; and discovered that although women in Africa were engaged in a prolific amount of new and innovative playwrighting and theatre practices, they are largely unheard of, and certainly not being engaged with by scholars, publishers or those setting curricula, largely because of the limited access to published material. In African literature, a fair amount of prose fiction and poetry has been published, but theatre texts lag significantly.[3] In papers on African theatre in journals, analyses tend to focus on twentieth century writing primarily by men, often published by Oxford University Press and Heinemann when they had their Africa series. However, women are significantly under-represented: Kathy Perkins's *Black South African Women* (1998), which reflects on women's experiences from both male and female perspectives, and the nine plays in *African Women Playwrights* (2009) constitute the only anthologies of plays about or by African women to date. A few contemporary women like Fatima Dike, Gçina Mhlope, Nadia Davids, Amy Jephta, Lara Foot-Newton, Yael Farber and Reza de Wet (South Africa), Stella Oyedepo, Julie Okoh and Irene

[3] This is paralleled in African literature awards, where there are a number of prestigious awards for prose fiction - the Noma award, the Caine Prize for African Writing, English, the Brunel University African Poetry Prize. Potentially the EBRD Literature Prize, launched in 2017 by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in partnership with the British Council and the London Book Fair, and the Wole Soyinka Prize for literature in Africa would consider a playwright, and the Prince Klaus fund has awarded playwrights as laureates. But there is no specific award for African Theatre yet. However, national associations do acknowledge playwriting. For example, the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), the second runner-up for its Drama Prize in 2018 was a woman, Achalugo Ezekobe.

Salami (Nigeria), Tess Onwueme and Sefi Atta (Nigeria/USA), Andia Kisia (Kenya) earlier playwrights like Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland (Ghana), Zulu Sofola (Nigeria), Micere Mugo (Kenya), Rose Mbowa (Uganda), Penina Mlama and Amadina Lihamba (Tanzania) have been published in collections or as single play-texts. This is shocking given the size of the African continent and the prolific creative activity of the women on it. Although many women work in community theatre contexts or use embodied forms, like physical theatre that are not easily transcribed for publication, these few publications cannot be representative of the rich and diverse work by African women theatre practitioners. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that these patterns are replicated in the numbers of works by female artists being programmed on mainstream theatres or festivals, which affect what audiences perceive about African theatrical activity, and the availability of texts for production and inclusion in secondary and tertiary curricula. For example, playwright Napo Masheane created work for 15 years in South Africa before any of her plays were staged in a state-funded theatre in South Africa, and that only after she had been invited to read her work at the Royal Court in London.

These imbalances are informed by many factors: Many women on the continent have limited access to education, new technologies and public platforms from which they can lobby regarding their ideas, needs or circumstances. In many places the legacies of colonialism are ongoing and have not been deconstructed or challenged in any meaningful sense. This is particularly true of land ownership and women's rights to conduct business or enter politics (see Mikell 1997). Women's issues continue to be subsumed into or marginalised by discourses on race and ethnicity, which for decades have taken precedence over others in the various struggles against (neo)colonialism. To some extent this situation remains because the legacies of colonialism have not been acknowledged and fully analysed, despite commissions like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Kenyan TJRC. Specifically,

women playwrights within and beyond the borders of some nation states are grappling with both the direct legacies of colonialism and apartheid in how women's roles are culturally defined and performed (Butler 2006, 2011), and how these legacies inflect into many aspects of their lives, including generational patterns of behaviour and perceptions of possibilities for future generations of women. However, because theatre practitioners are not working specifically and directly in the spheres of social science or politics, they are able to critique what is socially prescribed or taboo while imagining and rehearsing what has not yet been realised, and so begin to make new possibilities for women materially and performatively visible.

Since 2015, we have seen African students, particularly those in South Africa protesting the visible and invisible legacies of colonialism, epitomised by memorialisation practices, highlighted by the #Rhodesmustfall campaign, and in the lack of transformation of formerly white institutions of higher learning. Students have stridently called for educational institutions to 'decolonise' curricula and knowledge practices (For an analysis of the complexities of these campaigns, cf. Garman 2018). However, decolonising an education system is a complex undertaking because, as M. Jacqui Alexander argues, 'the epistemologies, systems and knowledges [empires] it created continue to define and haunt us (2005, 1). These epistemologies are affected by what is or is not published, which in turn defines what can or cannot be known, taught and discussed.

My next step was to explore how to begin addressing these imbalances, access African women playwrights and engage their work more widely. Perceiving the ways in which mobile phone ownership has transformed how individuals communicate with one another and access information across developing and emerging countries, as handsets and data services have

become more affordable, I began to research the potential of using new technologies to establish a network of African women creative practitioners. In 2015, GSM reported that, 'The mobile industry in Sub-Saharan Africa continues to scale rapidly, reaching 367 million subscribers in mid-2015' (2018), and by 2017 there were 455m subscribers in the region representing a 43% penetration (2018a). However, the research also emphasised that digital inequalities exist in any society and are unsurprisingly affected by gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Cooper and Weaver 2003; DiMaggio et al. 2004; Junco 2013). Although many of the studies I read were from the global north, the patterns remained pertinent; particularly regarding gendered differences in communication patterns, Internet skills and access to the technologies. For example, Muscanell and Guadagno (2011) found that men were more likely to use social networks to make new friends and play games; and women to maintain current relationships and post private messages, send friend requests and post photographs. Being aware that design affects use, my collaborator, South African playwright Amy Jephta, and I decided to commission a purpose-built application to create a space in which African women could identify themselves as creative practitioners and begin to connect with one another, programmers, funders, researchers and wider publics. In order to acknowledge my status as a white South African, and the issues of colonial legacies, which include who has power to conduct research, I consciously engaged with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples* in which she argues that, 'The possibility that approaches could be generated from different value systems and world views are denied even within emancipatory paradigm of "post-positivism"' (2012, 69) because of the very terms and assumptions in which they are cased. This argument requires that the researcher go beyond recognising personal beliefs, assumptions and their effects on their research to ask:

- Who defined the research problem?
- For whom is this study worthy and relevant? Who says so?

- What knowledge will the community gain from this study?
- What knowledge will the researcher gain from this study?
- What are some likely positive outcomes from this study?
- What are some of the possible negative outcomes?
- How can the negative outcomes be eliminated?
- To whom is the researcher accountable?
- What processes are in place to support the research, the researched and the researcher? (175-6)

Smith suggests that it is important to question the assumption that the individual researcher has an inherent right to certain knowledges because, 'Research in itself is a powerful intervention, even if carried out at a distance, which has traditionally benefitted the researcher, and the knowledge base of the dominant group in society' (178). Thus, she advocates the following strategies: avoiding specific indigenous issues or groups; building in 'personal development' for the researcher herself regarding the languages, cultures, concerns of the people with whom she will work; consultation with communities regarding support and consent for the proposed research; and 'making space' for indigenous voices in the research itself (179). In response, we adopted a partnership model of working with the network that differentiated research process and network management roles to recognise colonial legacies and power hierarchies, while actively supporting reciprocal knowledge generation. We conceptualised the online space as a democratic platform that would enable researchers and creative practitioners to interact with one another and compare methodologies, aesthetic choices and issues in ways that ensured that the participants remain in control of their own representations and knowledges, rather than being led by researchers' *a priori* questions or assumptions.

We also engaged with van House's argument that online 'participants are not simply representing but constructing themselves' (2011, 426) as part of a complex socio-technological assemblage, so that 'the design, norms, and practices around SNSs do not simply shape how people present themselves, but … discursively produce the subject by means of the identifications that are enabled versus those foreclosed' (428). Thus, we needed to be mindful of how the design itself would actively determine the ways in which these women would be in the world, and what they could or could not perform.

We identified Every1mobile (E1M) as the best technical collaborator because of their responsive, multi-device platform expertise for users in Africa, who have limited access to the internet, given the number of ISP subscriptions, overall number of hosts, IXP-traffic, and overall available bandwidth (see ITU 2005, 2010, 2016, 2017); and cost, as compared to the global north (see Chutel 2018). E1M has run projects in multiple countries that address development topics such as sexual health, digital and financial literacy, business skills, family planning, gender and nutrition; and reached millions of people. A key feature of E1M's platform is that it is optimised for use on feature phones and browsers available on those handsets. This was an important consideration, given the over 50% market share of mobile web traffic that a feature phone browser, Opera, had in Africa for 2016 (GlobalStats 2016). This feature is significant because the format of information for these phones is stripped-down and largely text-based, it is tailored to be low bandwidth for a low latency browsing experience, and to save on data transfer costs. E1M's platform contrasts with many modern websites that are bloated with extraneous code and media that are of no value on such devices. This includes the variety of open source tools such as WordPress and social network plugin BuddyPress, Drupal, Ning and Discourse, to name a few. Thus, our icons, banners, and uploaded photos would all be stripped down for the lowest data transfer possible,

E1M were also desirable as partners because they collect data generated from their online platforms and use web analytics to measure reach and user acquisition, user demographics and related online behaviour, the success of content in retaining users, knowledge and attitude change, and online or real-world actions taken by users. These metrics were reported to us regularly in the first two years of this project and helped us to monitor and adjust community engagement in a responsive way.

Together, via skype conversations with me as a researcher, Amy as an artist-researcher and E1M platform specialists, we dialogued on E1Ms existing site functionalities, against our aims and objectives to conceptualise the application we envisioned for this project. As E1M's traditional clients tend to work on message-based projects, we worked with them to create a more dialogic platform that would largely place control of the material on-site in the hands of the users. One such functionality was the calendar space, which allowed artists and programmers to highlight events and funded artistic opportunities that were searchable to their own communities and beyond.[4] This build consultation process highlighted the importance of considering how an online app's structure will affect how a network will function before a project starts. It was important and rewarding to challenge the assumption of a primarily one-way communication mode on this app build, particularly given our aim to work with decolonising research methodologies. It also suggests the potential impact research can have on even experienced professional organisations and businesses, if they innovate together.

[4] This functionality E1M developed with and for us and has since been rolled out to other clients.

The first space created was the artist's profile, which addressed the project's aim to facilitate an increased visibility and connectivity for artists, beyond their specific regions, nationally and internationally. The online profiles included the artist's name, location and profession, which were searchable by country, city, name. The African women artists had the additional capacity to upload whole or parts of playscripts, photos and links to video or YouTube clips; with a participant sign-up proviso regarding content usage by visitors.

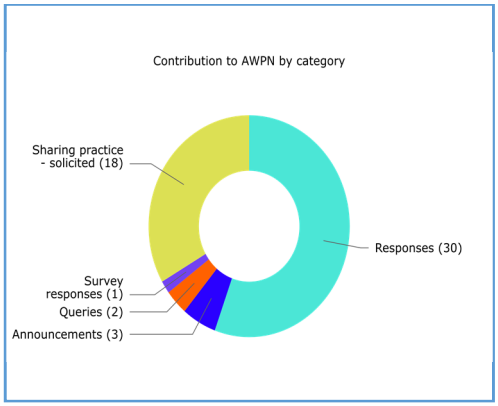
The Announcement section facilitated further connectivity between the artists and other stakeholders, including critics, producers, directors, artistic/literary managers, programmers and funders as it allowed artists to highlight their specific skills and projects. For example, Zimbabwean Playwright Thembelihle Moyo shared thoughts on her writing and rewriting processes; South African director Jayne Batzofin, shared how she works with writers; South African theatre-maker Ameera Conrad explored the importance of cultural context in writing; Kenyan JC Niala shared her writing process; playwright Napo Masheane analysed creating spaces for women's voices; and Koleka Putuma wrote on boundary breaking characters. These opportunities to share practice are important given the paucity of training available to writers in Africa, particularly women who often cannot attend university and who write or create in their 'spare' time. This space also facilitated various organisations advertising or funding opportunities.

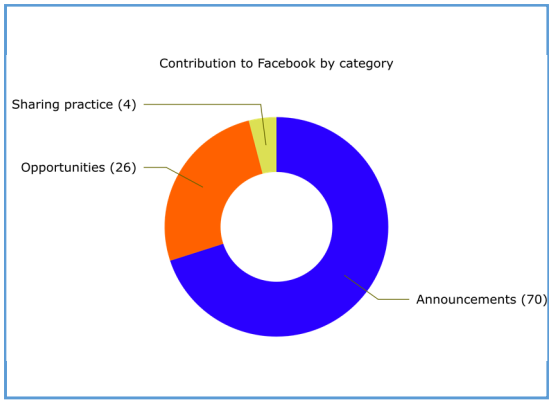
Although many of the features available through the AWPN app are similar to those on social media sites like Facebook, which we used in parallel to the app, where people share their profiles, events, and opportunities, the application's structure and searchability functions were major strengths as they shifted the network from a linear feed of information to an assembled bank of knowledge. The privacy aspect was also key to engaging people. Social media

specialist Mark Schaefer noted a 'shift taking place from social media to private media' in 2016 (as quoted in Rayson 2018, 2), and GetSocial suggested that in 2017 'private sharing is twice as large as public sharing (as quoted in Rayson 2018, 10). According to Buzzsumo, the trend is moving away from content social sharing, which 'have fallen from 8 in 2015 to just 4 in 2017' per 100m posts (as quoted in Rayson 2018, 8), with a 'flight to quality', where digital markets are advised, 'if you are going to share something with your audience you want it to make sure it is well researched and authoritative from a trusted source' (22). This social media research supported the way in which we conceptualised the closed forum to facilitate critical engagement between researchers' and the community around the women's experiences and specific circumstances in a safe space, moderated by an AWPN community manager agreed by the network of artists. This is the primary place we envisioned registered participants sharing work, analysing issues and co-creating knowledge regarding the specific experiences and concerns of the network's community, thus meeting Smith's decolonising approach to reciprocal knowledge generation that enables participants to remain in control of their own representations and knowledges.

The awpn.org site was launched at the Womens' Playwright International Conference in Cape Town in June 2015. By February 2017, the site had 115 registered participants, comprising creative practitioners across 18 countries, with some 6126 cumulative unique global visitors. From June 2015-June 2017, the platform saw over 10,000 sessions (meaning an instant where a user visited the platform for any period of time), with over 22,000 pages viewed on the platform, registered users increased to 140, from 21 countries (E1M reports): Largely Anglophone African countries, Europe, UK, USA, Canada, Chile, with some interest in the middle East and southern Asia.

Although the network grew slowly but steadily, we noted that while artists were willing, even keen to post events, abstracts of work, or even whole texts, they were more hesitant to post ideas or respond to debates in public. This is evident when we compare the sharing of practice on the app, which could be described as a closed, private space, with the open, more public Facebook site, and the types of engagements each of these sites engendered.





The data analysis evidenced in these graphs suggests that the Facebook site was being used primarily to share opportunities for work and announcements of events, and that most of the sharing of practice happened on the closed application. There also seemed to be a limit to how much people would share or collaborate without meeting face-to-face, which supports Linda Tuhiwai Smith's argument that, 'Building networks is about building knowledge and data bases which are based on relationships and connections. Relationships are initiated on a face-to-face basis … [which] is about checking out an individual's credentials, not just their political credentials but their personalities and spirit' (2012, 157-158). Aristea Fotopolou's (2016) research on the embodied nature and impact of digital networks underlines the need for network managers to acknowledge the materiality of the processes and relationships involved in these kinds of networks, which as Stephansen argues, also involves the making of new publics (2016, 38).

Our response to this data was to organise a face-to-face encounter between artists and researchers in the network to interrogate these patterns. This resulted in the first symposium ever held for African women creative practitioners in Africa. The theme was *Breaking Boundaries: African Women Writing on the Edges of Race, Gender and Identity.* In February 2017, 55 women from 8 African countries and the UK came together at the Arts Admin Collective in Cape Town to discuss some of the key challenges that artists face, like accessing funding, training and structures to support creative practices in Africa, how to work more collaboratively within the network, and think more creatively about performance spaces, outside the formal theatre complexes. They shared creative work, skills, expertise and good practices through structured workshops run by the women themselves, on topics informed by our research, without the research being overtly referenced. We watched two plays that were written, directed and performed by members of the network: Sara Shaarawi's *Niqabi Ninja,* which is set in Cairo during the chaos of the Egyptian uprising, and explores the range of harassments women face, and how one woman imagines an active response via an avenging comic Superhero. The second play, the Mothertongue Project's Langeberg Youth Group's *Mama Ruby*, explored the intersections between rural location, gender and the socio-economic struggles facing the six youths in the group. Seeing these plays collectively facilitated discussion around self-censorship, the role of theatre in solving social problems, the ethics and strategies involved in telling one's own and other peoples' stories. This offered a new model for how knowledge can be co-produced in ways that rendered researchers and artists equal in the exploration of ideas.

The ways in which the issues were engaged by the workshops could not have been predicted or facilitated *a priori* by a researcher. For example, I was surprised by how the issue of self-censorship, which was discussed regarding taboo subjects like gendered-violence or sexual

orientation, re-emerged in the workshop on ‘what is needed to create safe spaces for women to feel able to speak in public fora’. Facilitator Dr Makgathi Mokwena, psychologist and registered Arts Therapist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa and associated with The Mothertongue Project, asked participants to respond to the notion of personal and collective safety, trust and censorship through their bodies. This shift from discourse to embodied engagement moved subjects towards more subjective and less censored explorations of the questions. By the end of the workshop, group members articulated that the key issue for them was not trolling or fear of external criticisms, but the fear of losing their minimal resources, which inhibited their willingness to collaborate and share opportunities with one another. This demonstrated Fotopolou’s critique of how the ‘diversity of feminist cultures and identities operates within a wider cultural and political context of neoliberalism, in which discourses of autonomy and choice challenge any kind of collective identity’ (2016, 3). The group discussed how collaboration could engender critical mass and so become a key to visibility, greater access to resources and so create the potential for them to better manage their work as cultural capital. This session particularly made visible how legacies of Africa’s colonial pasts, which included dividing people according to their ethnic group, gender, sexual or religious orientations, have created mistrust and hierarchies of access to resources that continue to impact on Africans within and across countries.

The very embodied engagements between the women shifted the network from discourse on creativity to what Fotopolou terms ‘*doing* feminism and *being* feminist’ (2016, 3), where the women explored what these ideas meant as lived and performed behaviours. Feedback from participants suggested that they had formed new awarenesses around ‘how issues of social and political dynamics function’, about how to have ‘uneasy conversations’ about ‘access to state-sponsored institutions’ (E1M survey report 2017). Following the *Breaking Boundaries*

symposium, artists engaged more readily with one another on and offline; this suggested that the face-to-face engagement facilitated a richer ‘interplay between local embodied struggles, protests and the more discursive and disembodied activity online’ (Fotolopou 2016, 5).

When comparing these different modes and spaces of engagement it is clear that the face-to-face encounters usefully facilitated discussions around the participants’ reasons for their different degrees of engagement on the digital platforms. What emerged supported White and Le Cornu’s (2011) shift from considering online participants in terms of their being ‘digital natives (Hargittai 2007, 2010) to considering their engagements as either happy ‘digital residents’ who are comfortable projecting their personas online as a ‘digital identity’, or as ‘digital visitors’, who use it as a tool, seeking only information or opportunities online. Thus, the key to successful use of online sites is not so much understanding how people generally respond to new technologies, but rather understanding what motivates their behaviours

> … placing the emphasis on motivation allows for a wide variety of practices which span all age groups and does not require individuals to be boxed, inexorably, in one category or the other. Both ‘place’ and ‘tool’ have the capacity to incorporate motivation. Questions such as: ‘What am I going there for?’, ‘What am I hoping to achieve?’, ‘Which place best serves my purpose?’, ‘How long do I intend to stay?’, ‘Have I got the skills that I need?’ and ‘Am I happy to be on my own, or would I prefer to be in company?’ all fit within the Visitors and Residents paradigm and transcend issues such as age, technological ‘geekishness’, and the development of the brain, while still recognising that individuals may have a greater or less well developed natural aptitude for using technology and that some may never move (we avoid the term ‘progress’) beyond a low–level engagement of selecting a small range of tools for a limited number of purposes. (White and Le Cornu 2011, 10)

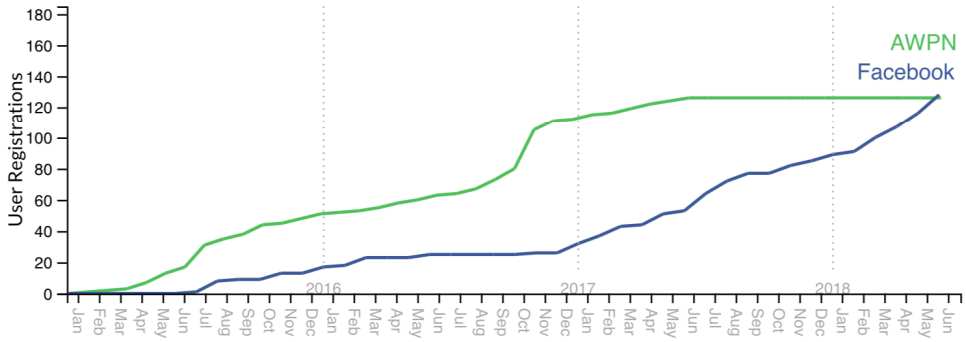
Thus, when building a network online, one needs to be mindful of participants' motivations and intentions, which Van House has noted is pressured and influenced by a variety of online and offline factors (2001, 426), in order to facilitate sharing and more utilitarian engagements with a site. However, Lanclos and Phipps (2018) argue that we need to go beyond the consideration of user identities to include 'the deeper ethical and political ramifications of being visible and active online' (preprint, 9). Increasingly, researchers are noting the impact of design when considering Social Network Sites from a feminist perspective. They are noting how technology, itself a construction, is fundamentally 'gendered' and racialised (Breland 2017), regarding 'who is recognized and who is not in prevailing discourses of science and technology' (Suchman 2007, 1) and ultimately largely reflective of the interests of their creators.

I turn now to comparatively evaluate the platforms, their efficacy and my learning from this project.

Analysis of Methodology, Process and Findings: facilitating a network on and off-line

On the specific level of this project we can say that the mobile app was successful in establishing a network of African women creative practitioners. Organisations became aware of the network and requested that we post opportunities for plays to be submitted for consideration for programming, development, fellowships or funding. When considering the time series chart showing the growth of membership in the Facebook and AWPN network spaces, with the green line signalling the mobile app and the blue line the Facebook engagement, but not covering the new closed Facebook group, it is clear that the app was more successful in registering participants than Facebook, and from the data analysis we believe this

is because of the facility for ‘private sharing’ from sources that are trusted, moderated and controlled, and that allows participants to keep control of their own material.



However, since losing the funding for the app at end 2018, we have maintained this space via a closed Facebook group, that recruited within hours of its establishment; and the network continues to grow (it had +300 participants in June 2019). The increase in engagement online and collaborations offline, despite a shift in platforms, supports Smith’s argument that a successful network must be about ‘building knowledge and data bases which are based on relationships and connections. Relationships are initiated on a face-to-face basis’ (2012, 157-158), which we facilitated through the first AWPN symposium. This view was supported by a participant, who reported after the event:

> It [the symposium] was all about bringing us together, up until I was in the network, I had never met my fellow playwrights. ... we all cried on the first night, because we African women who all had other jobs, all were doing other things, all writing plays, all very passionate about it, but none of us met each other. None of us had had the opportunity to discuss with each other all of the issues being discussed. And the biggest issue was: how do we get our work out there? (JC Niala, at Africa Writes, 30 June, British Library.)

This comment highlights the need for the network to enable the African women practitioners to connect with one another, disseminate their work more widely and thereby become more visible to theatre or festival programmers, educators, and others.

The efficacy of the network is evidenced by the significant number of new collaborations that particularly followed the symposium: a Ugandan artist was invited to take her work to a Zimbabwean festival; a Kenyan playwright was invited to develop new work with undergraduates at a South African university, a Cameroonian and South African company took new work developed collaboratively to festivals in South Africa, Cameroon and Angola. Via the network, researchers and publishers in Africa, Europe and USA are more aware of what is being written and produced by these women. As a direct result of AWPN, The Pulley & Buttonhole Theatre Company in Philadelphia, programmed three plays by a Ugandan and one by a Zimbabwean playwright for their The Value of a Life: African One Act Plays 2018-2019 season. Organisations are increasingly approaching AWPN to advertise opportunities for artists to propose work for consideration for programming, for fellowships or other funding.[5] A particularly significant organisational collaboration has been established with the Playwrights Guild of Canada, who from 2017 have set up an annual 3-month residency in consultation with AWPN for a Southern African playwright. The residency has provided dramaturgical and financial support ($5000 Canadian dollars) for the development of Southern African women's

[5] Examples include: In 2016 the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester approached us as they sought to commission a female Kenyan playwright for their project BIRTH; Equity in Theatre, Canada, reached out to 'help promote the activities and programming of AWPN', and the Arcola Theatre, London, called for plays by African women on specific topics or areas, like LGBTQ (2017). In 2018 the Camargo Foundation, France, advertised a four-week residency for mid-career/established African playwrights, the Arterial Network called for new designs for their logo and visual identity design for the African Culture Fund, and the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development (Netherlands) called for proposals for the Next Generation 2018, to support one-year initiatives by artists from Africa and Middle east between 15-30 years of age.

playwriting, after which South African directors and theatre venues stage the work on the artist's return to South Africa. This has cultivated meaningful artistic connections between Canadian and South African creative practitioners, and enabled artists: since the award's launch, two of the award's recipients have toured their work in Canada, one of the recipients has co-established a creative support initiative (Durban Womxn Playwrights) and one recipient has won the Distell National Playwright award, based on the script she developed during her CASA residency.

We addressed the issues of publication by calling for ideas or scripts that could be developed for a new collection of plays by African women in 2015, which we successfully pitched to Methuen publishers. From the many submissions we finally selected seven plays by authors from Egypt, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Cameron, Zimbabwe and South Africa that have been published in the 344-page anthology *Plays by Contemporary African Women* (January 2019), which Amy Jephta and I edited and introduced, and which includes introductions and contextualisations of each play by the author. The collection was launched in different parts of Africa, with all seven plays been staged as full productions or readings at the Theatre Arts Admin Collective in Cape Town in March 2019, alongside a weekend of playwriting workshops by some of the women published in the collection, and others from the network to further the developmental work begun at AWPN's first symposium in 2017. The collection was also launched at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry and the Oxford Playhouse in February 2019, where excerpts from three plays were performed by the Belgrade's Black Youth Theatre, followed by facilitated discussions of the audiences' reactions to the excerpts. This format illustrated how even plays from very specific contexts can facilitate conversations in wider contexts. For example, the first extract was from Adong Judith's *Silent Voices,* a play based on interviews with survivors from the Lord's Resistance Army from the 1990s to the call for

reconciliation in Uganda in 2008. When asked how they engaged with the stories of surviving child soldiers, the young performers (aged 12-18) drew parallels between the stories in the play and local gang culture they had encountered in their environments. This opened up conversations about when children are considered to have agency and held accountable for their actions, as opposed to being minors, before specifically engaging the debates raging regarding Shamima Begum's case in the UK. Koleka Putuma's play *Mbuzeni,* about four orphaned girls between the ages of 10-13 who are fixated with death and burials and the unseen forces that govern the laws by which we live, opened up discussions about how we do or do not engage with fear and death. The final extracts from Sara Shaarawi's *Niqabi Ninja*, referenced earlier, provoked conversations about intercultural responsibility, cultural ghettoes and gender stereotyping. These events provided a contextualised space for local diasporic young artists to connect with issues and artists from Africa. AWPN have since been invited by the Africa Writes project, managed through the Royal African Society, to do similar workshops from these plays in secondary schools in London. This marks a seminal moment as scholars and theatre producers note the power and potential of this creative work and hopefully will continue to support the publication and production of more plays by African women in and out of Africa.

Personally, the online network has provided me with a way of accessing artists and research material ethically, insofar as it simultaneously provided the participants with ways to benefit themselves and to control their knowledges, as I asked my questions and gathered my data. My research input has not been overt but has impacted on the community through the questions I have asked either directly or through facilitations via other artists and noted via surveys on new conceptual awareness and behaviours. Slowly academics are joining the online debates on race,

gender, new feminisms and aesthetics, and we hope the network will be constituted as an independent organisation in the near future.

More broadly speaking, this research has illustrated how a platform's structure defines the modes and levels of engagement of its participants. For example, a network is by definition wide-ranging and so needs a common *lingua franca*. However, it is important to remember the enormous diversity of languages spoken on the continent (Ethnologue currently counts 2143 African languages), with their distinctive cultures and sub-cultures. The online platforms enabled participants to communicate in whatever language they chose, but their choices highlight tensions between local and global communities and the ways in which language choice affects inclusivity, and deeply situated expressions of personal experiences. We faced this same issue in the play collection, which is published in English for widest distribution, but which included plays translated by the playwrights from local languages. These issues continue to be debated by the artists in the closed group.

As Applied Theatre practitioners have long acknowledged, it is important to consider the functionality of the fora and motivations of the participants in a network. Participants are obviously more willing to engage and share when there is a direct benefit to themselves. Exploring ideas is a luxury when resources - time, space, and funding – are very limited. Questions must be grounded in specific lived and immediate experiences, as evidenced by how the women responding in an extended way to invitations to comment on 'Life as a creative practitioner – what helps you stay in control of developing and producing your work'? Here women wrote passionately about the lack of funding via arts councils, and how artists' rights are 'violated' and they are 'exploited without compensation or experiencing frequent copyright infringements' (Botswana). A Zimbabwean playwright wrote, 'most African governments

recognize art as a hobby and not a profession', so the site was seen as 'a very good base for Africa female playwrights to gun not for individual gain but to put forward a united front collaborating across boundaries to produce work also qualifying and attracting international audiences and markets' (awpn.org 2017). The women called for funding, training workshops and residencies to 'boost skills and improve project execution', which is why the CASA project is an important aspect of AWPN.

Clearly innovative online research tools can be successfully used to constitute groups and track behavioural data. However, layering research methods and including both on and off-line fora supports better understanding of what may influence engagement as it acknowledges the complexities and realities of any network. It is important to remember that participants are embodied individuals interacting via media that affects, or even defines, the interaction itself. We must always be mindful of how we 'do' engagement and how the technologies we use affect how we 'perform' as artists, researchers and participants. New technologies are fast moving platforms and need users and researchers to challenge simplistic views that they are necessarily liberating spaces (Tovar 2012) and be clear about their potentialities for inclusion and exclusion.

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